Today we remember the conversion of Saint Paul the Apostle, that “wonderful conversion” as we prayed this morning, so that we might become agents of that conversion by following Paul’s “holy teaching.” I can give you an example from a week ago. As you know I have an interest in the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe as our second Rector was elected Bishop of the Great Sioux Nation in 1873.

You may remember that at the Lincoln Memorial on January 18 there was a convergence of three demonstrating groups. There were the Indigenous Peoples March, the antiabortion March for Life with a large group of boys from Covington Catholic High School in Kentucky many of whom wore the president’s “Make America Great Again” hats, and an extremist fringe group, some designate it a hate group, called the Black Hebrew Israelites. People are still unpacking what happened but I think it is fair to say the incident illustrated the toxic divisions in our society and our inability to listen with openness.

Now fast forward five days to this past Tuesday. 40 Native Americans gathered at the Archdiocese of Covington in hopes of turning Friday’s standoff into an instructive moment. They taught the value of reconciliation while others were making death threats against the High School. “Anybody threatening violence should be totally ashamed of themselves,” a Native organizer said. One man named Don Wegman came to that Tuesday protest also wearing the red “Make America Great Again” hat. He was a Trump supporter and came because he was worried about the threats to the high school children. But his message too was one of reconciliation. “My hat,” he said, “represents coming together, not tearing people down.”
He took off his hat as a gesture of respect as he listened to an Indian prayer. He heard Guy Jones, a Hunkpapa Lakota, speak. Guy is an enrolled member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe who comes from McLaughlin, South Dakota. Our young people went there some years ago for a powwow. Guy Jones is also a close relative of the late Bishop Harold Jones, the first Native American Bishop of the Episcopal Church or any Church for that matter. After Guy Jones spoke, Don Wegman darted around the crowd to meet him. The two looked at each other, then embraced. They exchanged numbers planning to meet on Friday. Wegman turned to leave. Jones smiled. “That’s what I was hoping for,” he said. This is what it means to be an agent of Paul’s conversion.

Paul was known by the name Saul before his conversion. He threatened violence. He made death threats. He acted illegally, that is without Roman authority, to execute followers of Jesus, what we might call lynching today. That was Saul. He reacted so violently because he believed fellow Jews, followers of Jesus, were including Gentiles, outsiders, as full and equal members of God’s people. That to him was an abomination.

Saul’s destructive persecution of followers of Jesus took him on the road to Damascus. The stone carving above the doors as you enter this church depicts the scene. A light brighter than the sun at noonday knocked him to the ground. He heard a voice in Hebrew asking, “Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Saul, who would change his name to Paul, believed that he had seen the risen Jesus in person. Jesus possessed a transformed but still physical body, wounded and at the same time glorified. He understood that Jesus had been raised from the dead, that Israel’s God had vindicated Jesus against the charge of being a false messiah, and so the only conclusion Paul could draw was that in fact Jesus is Israel’s Messiah and Lord of the world.

This one incident is the seed of Paul’s whole theology – justification by grace through faith. Paul is the most unlikely of apostles; one who had threatened death, executed Jesus’ followers, persecutor, assassin, a destroyer of faith. To one such as this Jesus appeared. It could only be an act of grace. In a letter to the church in Corinth Paul admitted that he was the least of the apostles, unfit to be an apostle, because he persecuted the church of God. But then he added, “by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor. 15: 9-10). No matter what we have done, no matter what we think we might have done, no
matter how incomplete we are, not one of us is cut off from God’s grace. Not Paul, not anyone. We have only to receive it, only to believe it, only to accept it through faith. By grace God in Christ has reconciled us to God and one another.

Now as you might imagine this shook Paul to the core. It meant a wholesale restructuring of what he had believed about God. He went right away to Arabia to try to sort all this out. For 2 ½ to 3 years he preached this gospel there and honed its message and implications about grace, justification through faith, and reconciliation. After this he would meet in Jerusalem with Peter, the first disciple called by Jesus.

Now we are ready to ask the question, “What is our vocation after Paul?” What are we called to do and be in the world in which we live? We are to be agents of conversion as was Paul from being a violent opponent to a nonviolent proponent of inclusion. We are sent out for this purpose as Jesus sent out the twelve disciples. It might take us into the convergence of conflicting groups, or hotly contested disputes, or vicious name calling so Jesus said to them, “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” They and we are to be agents of God’s kingdom whose nature is mending and reconciliation.

The conversion from opposition to reconciliation doesn’t just happen once, but it is continual. What happened between Don Wegman and Guy Jones needs to be repeated again and again. The removal of a hat with what some take to be a divisive message as a gesture of respect for the dignity of all people is a conversion that needs to be ongoing. On a good day the best of us I imagine reach a level of reconciliation approaching 75%. For that reason alone the effort needs to be continual. We are given an overflow of grace so that we can endure this effort to be reconcilers to the end.

To be an agent of reconciliation is to embrace the other. Two strangers with differing views look one another in the eye and hug. Paul, a Jew, embraces a Gentile and allows that each has a place in God’s household. The risen Christ is its own message of forgiveness, compassion stronger than death, grace that is full of life. To be an agent of reconciliation is to seek and serve this message in all people.

Finally, to be an agent of conversion is to be restrained. Jesus’ words to Paul were a common proverb, “It hurts you to kick against the goads.” This
means from now on the call to be an agent of conversion will constrain you. It will hurt to kick against the grace that God so freely bestows, or the compassion that God so dearly calls forth. Often today we lack constraint. We cut the other off at the knees and call him shorty, to use another proverb. But Jesus sends us out to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, that is with the wisdom to know the difference between things we can change and things we can’t, and the gentle confidence to reach out in peace. That’s what I was hoping for, Guy Jones said. That is what we were hoping for, the churches of Judea said when they heard that Paul was proclaiming the faith he had once tried to destroy. The grace of God knows no bounds. It touches the most incomplete of us, and sends us out to seek wholeness. And we glorify God because of that.

Amen.